THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES): (a) to (c) At present there is a shortage of 12,554 officers' in the Army. Deficiencies of varying levels have been existing over a period of time.

2. Some of the factors which could be attributed to the shortfall in the strength of officers in the Army are the following:—

(i) Although a good number of candidates pass through the written part of the examination, many get rejected through Service Selection Board (SSB) which is mandatory for selection of officers, as they are not of the requisite caliber.

(ii) Relatively risky and hazardous career in the Army compared to other options available, as the society develops and gets modernized, has also a significant impact on the preference of potential Army aspirants.

3. Several steps have been initiated by the Government. An Image Projection .Campaign of the Army was launched during 1997-98. The Campaign has made a positive impact on the availability and selection of candidates. Steps have been taken to continue the Campaign.

4. Through in-house re-appropriation of resources, the training capacity has been increased resulting in increased intake of about 400 officers per annum.

Flying clearance to grounded MiG-21's

1518. SHRI K. RAMA MOHANA RAO: Will the Minister of DEFENCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the Ministry of Defence has cleared the grounded Squardrons of MiG-21 for operational flying; and

(b) if so, the reasons therefor?

THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES): (a) There was no grounding of MiG-21 squadrons.

(b) Does not arise.